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PERSONAL

NOTES ON CUBAN CRISIS

Cabinet Meeting on Thursday, April 20th, the first day immediately after the collapse of the Cuban expedition became known.

I attended the Cabinet meeting in Rusk's absence and it was about as grim as any meeting I can remember in all my experience in government, which is saying a good deal.

The President was really quite shattered, and understandably so. Almost without exception, his public career had been a long series of successes, without any noteworthy set backs. Those disappointments which had come his way, such as his failure to get the nomination for Vice President in 1956 were clearly attributable to religion.

Here for the first time he faced a situation where his judgment had been mistaken, in spite of the fact that week after week of conferences had taken place before he gave the green light.

It was not a pleasant experience. Reactions around the table were almost savage, as everyone appeared to be jumping on everyone else. The only really coherent statement was by Arthur Goldberg, who said that while it was doubtful that the expedition was wise in the first place, the Administration should not have undertaken it unless it was prepared to see it through with United States troops if necessary.

At least his remarks had an inherent logic to them, although I could not agree under any circumstances to sending troops into Cuba -- violating every treaty obligation we have.

The most angry response of all came from Bob Kennedy and also, strangely enough, from Dave Bell, who I had always assumed was a very reasonable individual.

The discussion simply rambled in circles with no real coherent thought. Finally after three-quarters of an hour the President got up and walked toward his office. I was so distressed at what I felt was a dangerous mood that I walked after him, stopped him, and told him I would like an opportunity to come into his office and talk the whole thing out.

Lyndon Johnson, Bob McNamara, and Bob Kennedy joined us. Bobby continued his tough, savage comments, most of them directed against the Department of State for reasons which are difficult for me to understand.

When I took exception to some of the more extreme things he said by suggesting that the way to get out of our present jam was not to simply double up on everything we had done, he turned on me savagely.

What worries me is that two of the most powerful people in this administration -- Lyndon Johnson and Bob Kennedy -- have no experience in foreign affairs, and they both realize that this is the central question of this period and are determined to be experts at it.

The problems of foreign affairs are complex, involving politics, economics and social questions that require both understanding of history and various world cultures.

When a newcomer enters the field and finds himself confronted by the nuances of international questions, he becomes an easy target for the military-CIA-paramilitary type answers which are often in specific logistical terms which can be added, subtracted, multiplied, or divided.

This kind of thinking was almost dominate in the conference and I found it most alarming. The President appeared the most calm, yet it was clear to see that he had been suffering an acute shock and it was an open question in my mind as to what his reaction would be.

All through the meeting which took place in the President's office and which lasted almost a half hour, there was an almost frantic reaction for an action program which people would grab onto.

NSC Meeting, Saturday, April 22nd

There were some thirty-five people at the NSC meeting on Cuba. Again Bob Kennedy was present, and took the lead as at the previous meeting, slamming into anyone who suggested that we go slowly and try to move calmly and not repeat previous mistakes.

The atmosphere was almost as emotional as the Cabinet meeting two days earlier, the difference being that on this occasion the emphasis was on specific proposals to harrass Castro.

On two or three occasions I suggested that the greatest mistake we could make would be to pit the United States with its 180 million people in a contest against a Cuban dictator on an island of 6 million people. I stressed that while we are already in a bad situation, it would be a mistake for us to assume that it could not disintegrate further and an almost sure way to lose ground was to reach out in ways that would almost surely be ineffective and which would tend to create additional sympathy for Castro in his David and Goliath struggle against the United States.

These comments were brushed aside brutally and abruptly by the various fire eaters who were present. I did think, however, that the faces of a few people around the table reflected some understanding of the views I was trying to present, notably Dick Goodwin, Ted Sorensen (which is surprising), Arthur Schlesinger, and above all Jerry Weisner.

The President limited himself largely to asking questions -- questions, however, which lead in one direction.

I left the meeting with a feeling of intense alarm, tempered somewhat with the hope that this represented largely an emotional reaction of a group of people who were not use to set backs or defeats and whose pride and confidence had been deeply wounded.

However, I felt again the great lack of moral integrity which I believe is the central guide in dealing with tense and difficult questions, particularly when the individuals involved are tired, frustrated, and personally humiliated.

If every question in the world becomes an intellectual exercise on a totally pragmatic basis, with no reference to moral considerations, it may be that we can escape disaster, but it will certainly be putting the minds of the White House group to a test when it becomes necessary to add up the components, large and small on the plus or minus side of a ledger and when the minds that are attempting to do this are tired, uneasy, and unsure, the values and the arithmetic are unlikely to reflect wise courses.

NSC Meeting, Monday, April 24th

The climate is getting considerably better, and the emotional attitudes are falling back into line. If anyone had not attended the previous meetings, he would have

thought the NSC meeting this morning had its share of fire and fury. However, it was in far lower key .

Ted Sorensen called me aside to say that he was glad I had said what I did, and Dick Goodwin called me to say I had shown great courage in the last few meetings and he was grateful for it.

At this stage plans continue for all kinds of harrassment to punish Castro for the humiliation he has brought to our door. However, the general feeling is that all this should be handled carefully, that there should not be too much publicity, that attitudes of others should be taken into account.

There was a reference of making up a black list of those nations which had voted against us, such as Mexico and Brazil and of finding some means to punish them. I did not take this too seriously.

It was interesting to see a cablegram prepared as a result of the meeting, which misrepresented the entire mood of the meeting. The cablegram was prepared for our ambassadors in Latin America and would have dragged reluctant Latin American governments into a show of power and force against Castro, cutting off diplomatic relations, shutting off trade, and so forth.

I was rather startled when I saw the cable, particularly since it had already been initialed by Dean Rusk. However, I called Dean at home at 8:00 and told him I thought the cable totally ^{was} represented the meeting. He agreed that this was so, and I proceeded to have a first and last page written which showed the view of the President, asking the ambassadors to show great discretion, not to get any publicity, and that no government should be pushed or pulled into positions it was not prepared to take, and that the ambassadors should use their own judgments, avoiding reckless statements which would create the impression of the United States being a wobbly, uncertain, and vindictive power.